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12 |

RIDING THE BUZZ

Owners making the most of online ratings | Small Biz 12

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HARNESSING SOCIAL FEEDBACK

Businesses respond to Yelp reviews to manage customer service, image

MARK ANDERSON | STAFF WRITER

With the arrival of social media, even the smallest retailer can now expect public reviews. Experts say owners must be prepared to take advantage of the praise or defuse the criticism.

Customers searching online are likely to find reviews of a business from services like Yelp, Urban Spoon, TripAdvisor or others — often appearing higher on the page than the company's own website.

"If you own a business, you can choose to ignore social media, but it isn't going to ignore you," said Linda Duke, principal of Duke Marketing, a San Rafael marketing company.

Word of mouth has always been critical. But consumer rating services now give every customer — satisfied or otherwise — a megaphone. And they provide just another reason for businesses to make sure they are always presenting their A game.

In a service business, "you are always presenting your best face, and that is even more important when anyone can write a review," said Sacramento public-affairs consultant Doug Elmets.

FIGHTING MISINFORMATION

The challenge for small-business owners can be keeping up with the constantly changing array of sites, and the constantly growing list of comments from customers.

Keeping current on which social media sites matter most for a business is difficult but important, Duke said. "This is the

chess game everyone is playing today. You have to learn the strategy," she said.

A key part of the job is correcting misinformation, said Calista Wengler, a spokeswoman for Paragary Restaurant Group, which owns 10 restaurants and bars in the area, including Esquire Grill.

"People post whatever they want. Sometimes they post our hours, and they post them wrong. We have to monitor it all the time," she said.

Paragary has "claimed" its Yelp site, a step that allows an owner to respond — publicly or privately — to reviewers. Yelp will not remove a business or edit consumer comments, but it will let owners add detail to their listings and answer customer comments for free, Yelp spokeswoman Stephanie Ichinose said.

Grange Restaurant in the Citizen Hotel monitors social-media sites daily, said Troy Christian, food and beverage manager with Grange Restaurant.

Not everyone who reads a review is going to believe what it says, but it does give a person an outline and a feeling for the restaurant, which is why Christian replies to any critical review with a public apology for a bad experience.

"We try to get them to try us again so we can make it up to them," Christian said. "You can fight it or you can embrace it. We have chosen to embrace it."

He sends a personal — and private — message of thanks for good reviews.

"Yelp is one of the most-used apps on iPhones. When people are in a new city and they want to know where to go, many of them go right to Yelp, so we have to monitor it," Christian said.

That's the right idea, said Duke of Duke Marketing. A disgruntled customer can be turned into a fan with the proper handling.

"You can get creative. If you do get a bad review, you can contact that person and invite them back or make them an offer. You can take that one negative and turn it into a dozen positives."

ATTRACTING CUSTOMERS

Yelp started in San Francisco in 2004. It is now in seven countries. It introduced its iPad application in December, which is free. The site continues to grow. It had 45 million unique visitors in the month of January of this year alone.

Yelp has more than 15 million local reviews on businesses, with nearly a third of them for restaurants.

Whatever the risks, Yelp and sites like it also can help. Mohammad Anwar, who owns Shaz Restaurant with his wife, Nasrin, said these sites draw customers.

Shaz features Pakistani and Indian cuisine and tends to get glowing reviews, but it has one of the most obscure locations in the Sacramento area. Yelp is how a lot of people find out about the restaurant, he said.

Shaz is at the end of a long parking lot, off the dead end of Airport Drive, off of Longview Drive, which is a winding section of road leading to warehouses between where Interstate 80 and Capital City Freeway connect north of Sacramento.

Word about the restaurant spread from people who have found it.

The Anwars make a point of asking people to post their own reviews of the restaurant online on sites such as Yelp, which widens the net of people who can discover it.

"We mention Yelp to a lot of people and ask if they would like to review us," Anwar said.

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